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College of Humanities and Sciences
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This is to certify that the thesis prepared by Cindy Lynn Cunningham
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May 1, 1992
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Rituals

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

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May, 1989

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* This symbol is used to indicate a space between sections or stanzas of a poem whenever such spaces are lost in pagination.

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I

THE VAMPIRE IN THE BASEMENT

The vampire
comes in the noonday
sun, swoops down
on me from beneath
wooden stairs,
his black cape
covers my face.

I say "I'm scared."

He bites
the very best vein.

Sucks and sucks
until I do not exist.

I leave my body,
float to the ceiling,

peer down
at the black shape
kneeling over
what appears to be
a child.

He breathes loud
like snoring
like daddy.

I watch the drips
on the concrete walls
slide down
to meet the brown
shag carpet. The child
on the floor
calls me back,
the vampire retreats
to his closet safety.

I sift
into her, try
to fill her.
She is afraid
his breathing
will explode
the closet, shake down
the house.

We begin
our familiar game of naming
those things
we love the best--apples, baths,
warm summer sun, until
she feels the shadows
pull away, her breathing

easing, swelling
into that gentle rhythm
she knows
is her own.

FLIGHT

She breaks out, arcs her body
like an Olympic gymnast, her home
too many trees behind. Too many hills
between her and the sloping bank
where the tire swing, erected
by the mothers, hangs--
halfway to home, halfway to creek.
She helped her mother loop thick-furred rope
over the limb, draping it like a python, fallen
at their feet, limp, hemp-curved.

Later, after children, swinging,
cut grooves into the bark,
she climbed the tree
before the streetlights came on,
bathed the limb-scars with creek water,
oiled the branch with olive oil
she'd sneaked
from her grandmother's medicine cabinet.

Too far from this now, she clutches
the vine, swings out, fast and far, cries out:

"I am, Goddamnit, I am!"

The vine breaks. The time breaks, and she
breaks down to the creek rocks, the crawdads,
the muscodines, ripe and wild.

She breaks the arc, the perfect ten of the gymnast,
lands in the pollution, the rot,
the copperhead creek
her mother warned her not to play in.

The current, narrow and strong,
claims one red shoe, swirls and bobs it
out of sight, out of reach, and she,
this beautiful child,
in the still of island wind,
breaks into song.

THE CHAPEL, WAYNESVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

Momma followed Pastor Maples
to Waynesville. Moved the family
South, packed us into
the small house on the corner.

Patti, next-door, propped up
against the white house-slats,
cracked peanut shells
from the brown paper bag
between her legs.

She shelled the nuts, ground
each husk into earth, popped
pale meat in her mouth,
the burnt ones sent sailing
like grandpa's tobacco juice--hurled,
spiraling to red earth.

Patti learned to love Dick Maples,
clung each Sunday to his thigh,
her tiny patent shoes planted
on his thick brown loafers.

Once, she took me to the chapel--
Pastor let her visit every day, she said,
as we creaked back heavy chapel doors,
the musk smell of an empty church
drawing us deeper. From the Pastor's study
an arc of bright light waxed the floor.

When Patti spooned my hand in hers
I pulled away, slicked my palm dry
against my Toughskin jeans, passed through
the door's arch, the rust carpet,
the wooden office smell.
Patti swept past me, into his lap.

I waited there, seeking the reason
for my blushing, for my desire
to run to his arms
like my friend, pleading for him
to encircle me, to sit me
on his knee, as Jesus
sat those children in the Bible
on his lap, telling them stories
long and patient, and touching,
so slight, their hair--

the touch of grace

I had never quite known.

FOR MOTHER

The first time I caught you
I was seven. School let out early
from heat, a heat that humped, crouched,
as even the children walked solemn,
hardly relieved for the afternoon release.

I came in through the back, found you,
quiet and reposed, propped up
in your kitchen chair
surrounded by candy wrappers torn
at the middle, an empty
gallon milk jug, Weight Watcher
bread bags split open beside you.
I watched as you perched
the steel knife, just so, across the top
of the hollowed out peanut butter jar.

Your face was pocked red,
eyes swollen, tired, like the time
I awoke from a dream and slipped
to your room, to find you
kneeling by the bed, hands clasped,

knuckled white against the blue
down comforter. I did not speak
as you rose, as you lifted your eyes
heavy from crying. I returned
to my bed, curled
beneath slick sheets of cool cotton,
tucked in and silent.

Now, here, in my own dark house,
in my own kitchen, I think
how it differs from yours--
no wallpaper, fruited and vined,
tangles my walls, but tan-slatted
folding partitions and slick
counters, smooth and unmarked, envelop me.
No pots, no iron skillets hang
black and heavy
threatening to unleash
from silver hooks above.

Outside, the calls of summer scavengers,
throaty and wild, shred the night.
I want to fling wide the window
bust it open and soar, sleek predator,

cool and invincible--but I'm afraid,
afraid to witness this world alone.
I close my eyes to the fluorescent glare,
rock back, trusting thin chair legs
to support me.

Back then, mother, if I could have understood,
I would have flared every light, every candle
in the place, expecting to chase away
your darkness, those piercing night-cries,
that rocking thunder that threatened
your double thick window panes.

SUNDAY AFTERNOONS

Daddy, couch-bound, eyes closed,
curls under grandma's crocheted afghan.
From the T.V. screen, tournament golf
flickers green light
and a droning murmur
about murky water, sand-trap ruses.

Passing the couch my father lies
on, I crouch low, shuffle past.
He does not awaken,
shifts slight as I creep.

At the television I pause,
listen for his breathing,
risk the change. I flip the channel,
two stations, three. Daddy,
old possum,
throws back the afghan, shouts
"Caught you!" sends fear
through me. He laughs,
sinking back, knitted into safety,

bringing back golf
with a flick of remote control.

I slink away
to the quiet kitchen tile, to mother.
We eat together, solemn, slow,
slicking peanut butter
onto wheat crackers, sharing the steel knife,
avoiding, even by chance,
the slightest touch of our hands.

SKATING, FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH LOCK-IN

The door's barred until morning, the teens,
on white leather skates, balance low,
crouch in a human chain
whipping through arc and painted curve
of the converted basketball court,
the inner church rink, their laces looping
under flat metal hooks, criss-crossed
in x'es of cotton.

In the safety of the pantry
I check off stock for the lock-in--
cases of Cheerios, gallons of rich milk,
Mars bars--then slip back
to the pastor's lounge, into sheets
of prophecies, the beatitudes around me.
My cup steams full--dark chocolate,
three marshmallows foaming, thickening.
Last year, last lock-in, I said Jesus
could not forgive what I had done. Pastor
moved in to share my chocolate, close, the vapors

leaning like tendrils as he cooled the liquid,
breathed lightly on the surface.

And together, we began the Lord's prayer.

I, kneeling before him, eyes closed,
bowed down, became aware
of his trembling, his holy hard-on
straining to break through
as gently
he placed his palm on my hair.

I lean deeper, saved now, in black leather arms
of the Pastor's chair. They cradle me here, while the blades
scrape and the jerky whistles knock
against the door, against the heavy metal lock
clasped tight, clamped secure.

RUNNING AWAY

First time out
Preacher paid our way
when Patti told him
her sister was dying.
She, hip-cocked, sure,
knew he'd buy it, rocked back
on her Dingo boots,
her army jacket bulky and long,
hiding scars from blades
tracked across her arms.

On the bus she curled in the back
with Sam, the blond-haired trucker
from Mississippi, drank his whiskey
straight from the bottle,
then sucked him dry again and again
as I hunched down, three seats ahead,
smoking the Marlboros
she'd taught me to inhale.

I pretended not to notice, not to care,
what she did, stretched long

in the back, but she sent him to me.
She told him I needed him. So I took
his whiskey to my lips, faked
a swallow, let it burn
as he kissed me, thick-tongued, liquor-based.
Sliding closer he whispered
how he wanted to be inside of me.
I could not push or pull
as he edged near, but pressed my palm
against his blue flannel shirt,
his chest warm, so surprisingly soft,
as I tensed, breathed in
Greyhound, Aqua Velva--
the same scent my father
splashed each morning.

Midnight, Patti and I entered
Colonial Heights, stayed first
behind a laundromat, snaked, belly down,
blower to blower,
catching blasts of heat, sporadic
from dryers swirling indoors.
Late, we crept inside
the triple load dryer

pockmarked black, white with blowholes.
We fit, barely, our faces pressed together,
breathing stifled, until hot, breaking out,
we fled the Coin-op laundry, raced
through city streets singing "Free Bird"
loud as children, until finally, exhausted and sore,
we flung ourselves spread-eagle to pavement,
clinging tight to each other, lost in the scent
of cigarettes, sweat, and Aqua Velva.

DEATH MASK

I want to drink
until I curl
to white porcelain,
cheek pressed
to cold tile.
I'll swill Martini's
from crystal, sway
to blues singers,
sing loud to cracked
walls and chipped pipes.
I will say
"I am beautiful"
while I circle Absolut,
ice curling
to the glass
until I sink
in bathroom's safety,
secure, and into
a warm towel will whisper
low, "I am."

FUCK THE DYING

I want to make love
to the dying, those so thin
the wind does not bend them
but breaks them down.
I'll press them hard
to wire metal fences, force
knife blade under rib cage.
I'll take their hearts,
hold them high and drink
from the aortas of the dead.
I'll crawl inside them, curl fetal,
lock ribs around me. I will grow
into each body, my hair becoming
their hair, my breasts swelling
into their breasts, my eyes
focusing through their eyes.

I will be one of them, a shadow-life
scurrying through the graveyards, dancing
and reeling through tombstones and mourners.
And there the mourners will worship
me, shadow-wraith, whispering

my night ballads, trying desperately,
my arms wrapped tight, to keep them all
inside me, tucked in and safe.

LOCKED OUT
(for Elizabeth)

The music plays too loud
for you to hear
the window panes break
as my hands slide through
to the wrists.
I'm jarred back to the night
when locked out
we snaked around the apartment
seeking the one pliable screen.
Indoors, we poured Merlot
into thick red wine glasses,
pushed back furniture, exposed
the hardwood. We tried
the Russian dance--Squat. Kick. Tuck.
I kicked. You tucked.
We went down together, your glass
shattered at the head, mine
cracked a perfect line from top
to bottom. We could not rise
for laughter, rocked together

in '82 Merlot, in pieces
of split crystal.

Tonight, with the drum of bass
between us, I sink down
into the slick shards that cover
the floor. They glisten
like sliver-flecked pavement
on a summer's afternoon. I pick out
the sharpest bits--the thin ones
that dull more slowly, each slip
into my wrist raising crimson.
I press the thin of my arm
to my mouth and taste
this blood that burns my tongue.

In the living room
the cassette flips back
to the beginning. I remember
how the hardwood, slick with wine,
seemed to cradle our rocking
as the Havah Nagilah scratched out
another round. I would risk
the fall again, would force back

the chairs and tables, would peel back
the floor itself
to fall down again with you, encircled
and turning, but you
are too far away, too far to hear
the pane break, the glass pierce
my skin, translucent and fine.

DOWN MONUMENT AVENUE

Autumn. Dusk. The sky a violent red,
layered violet, fuses the two--
my lover and my friend--together.
It melds touch, their quiet laughter.
They lean in, marking the path
with the pop and crunch of jaundiced
gingkos. They have forgotten me
as I lag behind, imagining
their folding into my brass bed, covered
in crochet, grandma's spread, all things
dissolving but the breathing
they feed into each other.
I know how it would be--
I've felt both against me, their kisses
changing in darkness.

The side alley, sloe-black, calls me in
to splattered walls, brick-chill.
I crouch, like Cain, marked,
cast-off, want a man
to slip into the alley, into me, our bodies
rising, leaning, buffeted together--

his scent becoming my own sweat-smell--
these two will come to know it.

Fallowed here in time, in namelessness,
I press against crumbling brick.
No one comes back for me.
They move on, outside, as I break out
in a laughter that blankets
the blazoned sky, until I hear
no longer the explosion of berries,
yellow and immature, popping
beneath the feet of women walking.

RITUALS

I used to think city lights burned
like stars
in a summer's afterglow. Now,
they merely glare against the pane.
They smatter my reflection. Below,
an eighteen wheeler
gravels into E.G. White's produce lot.
The company logo, "Gabriel", brown
and dull, marks its side. On Liberty Street
a woman, tucked into a mini skirt
hails dealers like cabs, small
tan envelopes slipping between them.

In the king-size hotel bed
your breathing falters.
I don't want you to find me here,
window-bound, hands frozen
to the cool air vent.
I am not where I am supposed to be,
curled behind you, spooned tight.

*

I return to the sill, to the graveled
lots and corner streets. Wait Chapel's
steeple flickers red, then white,
calls me back
to childhood services, slick cool pews,
mahogany altars.

I want to offer myself for sacrifice,
an ancient Aztec ritual of incense, pyramids,
and virgins--whole, open, waiting
for a high priest to split them open,
to sink inside rib cages, hearts
pulsing in his palm, exchanging
life-beats for the souls of all the living.

There, on the holy slab of culture,
a virgin blessing on the world, I would
finally become a complete
unity of being.

II

WALKING HOME BAREFOOT

Electronic spotlights
trigger on
when I enter
the owner's circle
on the 13th
block. They blind me
as I pace, broken
pavement jars
my heels.

Ahead, two women,
holding hands
turn onto a narrow
brick path.
I want to tell them
I am barefoot.

I realize
I have never seen
so many cats
in any one city--
felines perched

on mossworn
bricks, root-buckled
cement. They circle me,
and laze
as I swing my case.

I am almost
home and see,
twenty feet or so ahead,
a black man
leaning on his stoop
a thick, black pipe
perched between his teeth.

His smoke hangs
like spiderwebs.

My step falters.
I regain,
swing low my leather,
as his smoke
weaves a net
about my hair.

I pass
through the cats'
backyard graveyard,
through the
apartment complex
garbage bins, up
rickety wooden stairs,

until finally,
chain-locked secure
I kick back, relaxed,
and listen to the brew
of Kona coffee,
each percolated drip
resounding, muffled
flailing uselessly
against the small, clear
plastic dome.

THE WOMAN I ONCE WANTED TO BECOME

Each morning she released curtain ties,
let fall the heavy brocade.
Guarding the windows, she peered
through folds for delivery boys
and stray neighbors.
She beckoned a chosen few, bummed
cigarettes, downed
Popov vodka from flutes
left her by her grandmother.

She wore always those frayed slippers,
once pink, now pale and browned,
open-toed, big toe
pointing out, fuchsia polish cracked,
chipped ice, frozen there.
Each night in darkness she opened
the drapes, drunk, breasts bare,
her stomach sagging, scarred
from births as if a cat had planted
his back paws in flesh, leapt out.

At the end of the evening, she lights
her final cigarette, and waits
before the glass covered darkness,
still for a moment, listening
to the silence, to the empty hollows
echoing through each corner
of her vast and solid realm.

TEENAGE PREGNANCY

Three days old
our daughter sleeps
in her yellow flowered car seat.
Mother and I carried her in,
seat and all,
to keep her from waking.

Cross-stitching balloons and bears
I wait for you
as mother reels off gossip
and Christmas lists.
The white pine, newly decorated,
blinks subtle shadows
across the portrait-lined walls
where I hang
slightly off-center, my hair
pixie-cut and perfect.

I pull each cross-stitch through taut
material, curve more and more
black string to ground
the pasteled balloon's flight.

Mother continues her list
of nonsensical couplings and presents.
Her words float about
loose and dangerous, tilting over
and under me and my daughter.

I watch how she sleeps, how she mouths
silent O's and startles, her hands
clutching air before her, and I think
of that first time you touched my hair--
I was fifteen, too skinny, too cocked-up sure
that nothing could ever hurt me
again. You brushed the hair from my eyes,
your fingertips light and gentle.

Across this den of flickering pine,
my daughter sinks back into plastic flowers,
and mother starts in on recipes--
chocolate drop cookies, banana nut bread,
russian tea. I lean into the couch,
put away my thread, my needle, my pattern,
and without you
await the hunger of my sleeping child.

LEARNING TO RIDE, AT SEVEN

My daughter straddles her new bicycle.
Kickstand secure, she rocks her handlebars
back and forth--she's getting the feel of it.

I'm tired tonight, too tired to wheel her up
and down the drive promising never
to let her fall, knowing
I'll release her and she'll topple
over, forgetting
that feet go down first.

She leans in, asking to touch my scars,
knees white-marked--a handle bar flip
when I doubled Lena Howell
on my bike
and barreled blind into the curb
hurling Lena to pavement--
a concussion, a broken collar bone.
I tell Nicole only
that my scrapes hurt

but my grandma took care of me, bought me
presents, scratched my back for hours.

And tonight, when the cicadas cut again
into the dark, if Nicole wheels out
the drive, over cracked and buckled cement,
I don't think she'd look back,
her tire treads popping broken stones,
ripened crabapples, brittle leaves.
I see her pedal off, churning through
a serenade of cicadas
secure in the lie that all survive
the scars of pavement, that all are granted
the soothing touch of a grandmother's love.

NATURE SCIENCE CENTER

With my daughter I pace the length
of the penned-in petting zoo. The goats
swarm around, zig-zagging through puffed-up
squawking chickens, bleating sheared sheep,
and children
wrapped in Sunday jackets and home-spun scarves.

Nicole perches at the foot of the forbidden
gray crag, the goats' rock haven.
She braces herself, feet solid, hip distance
apart. Passes no one but goat kin.

Nicole sets her jaw, warns me back as I tell her
our time is almost up. Parents
begin gathering their children, try
to quiet them out the gate, away from tail-pulling
and screeching. The children scatter,
seek one last feather.

A brown and white flecked goat lumbers down
the mound, heads for a small boy
in a bright red jacket. I think

of Nicole's father--those dark eyes,
haughty haunches swaggering like a teens'.

From behind, the goat bites down
on the white cotton lining
of the boy's jacket pocket. The child
releases his stash of small stones,
plastic figurines, and pennies, spills them
to earth, Onan's seed, then bolts
for the gate. His father, frantic
after his other children, wants
to rescue his son. The families churn,
mini-tornadoes swirling to the gate.

Nicole frets towards the crowd, wants to meld
them back together, wants the daddy goat
to return to his haven, to her
as sentry, watch-keeper.

I want to haul her out
like the woman beside me
dragging her son by the arm, his wails
piercing the flow, but I cannot face
this sea of whirling bodies, this mass

of animal families out for the afternoon,
for the slotted thirty minutes.

I slide down the diamond-wired fence,
dig my heels into trampled earth
and animal droppings. I reach out
for a small object half-buried in the dirt--
a button, light purple, shiny,
from a child's coat or sweater.
I tuck it in my pocket, my fingers tight
around it, worrying the round plastic holes.

Standing, I cross the petting zoo, open
my arms to Nicole, no longer keeper
but daughter now, seven, in love
with me, with my promises of ice creams
and swing-sets. She tucks her hand
in mine, strides confident to the gate,
her face upturned to me, smiling.
She appears completely willing
to let her post, her gray goats' crag, go.

WITH MY LOVER, TAKING PICTURES

We weave through Shockoe Bottom
seeking abandoned buildings to pry into.
Today we discover an old tobacco warehouse,
its doors sagging on creak-hinge, half-open.
The haggard wood, gray and stripped,
clings to our flattened bodies
as we skinny past, our faces turned
against splinters and nail scrapes.

Inside, you separate from me,
ferret through rusted machinery
and colored glass. I slip
to the window, to the waxing sun,
where light bleeds through slats
of broken browns and forms a box
of lacerated planes around me.

Through cracks in the swollen wood
I watch the gray city pigeons,
white breasted, crouching, tucked
in corners of train trestles.
I long to drag you out, to set these birds

spinning and shrieking around us, their
wings beating, white breasts streaking
through the blur, the storm about us.
And then, you'd drop that pack you carry
and cling to me for all the time it takes
those pigeons to pass
leaving us together, here, focused and alone.

WHY WE BROKE UP

Moving slow through the living room,
you smoked the last cigarette,
found the ski mask, brushed your teeth.
The woman next-door slept quiet, calm.

You climbed through her den window,
stripped down to bikini briefs
and ski mask. In her room
you listened to her breathing,
until at last, you shook the bed
gently, woke her,
said you wouldn't hurt her
if she'd just talk.

The woman, wrapped in sleep,
must have jolted,
pulled the sheets tighter,
suddenly willing
to do what she had to.

I too, have seen you edging close,
know what it feels like to have you

enter me, a pillow
pressed across my face.

But with her, in that strange room,
you held back, talking of women
and religion, for hours. Once,
in passing, you mentioned
ripping the sheets
into long ties, cotton handcuffs, how
you'd want her to lie still
as you forced your way in, whispering.

On leaving you had her slip
from her bed, barefoot,
and watch you dress. Then, outside
on the moonlit porch, so secure,
you made your one mistake--
you peeled off the mask, trusting
her. She let you leave,
then called the police.

Home, you slid between our sheets,
unsuspecting and quiet,

spooned yourself about me,
and rocked yourself, but not me, back to sleep.

WAITING TABLES, MATT'S BRITISH PUB

The chef's thick, black hands
reach across the serving line
for the beads my daughter
strung so tight, my Mother's day gift.
I twitch beneath my tray, heavy
with glazed meats,
and fine pastries, coiling back
from the yellowed eyes before me.
I turn to the swinging doors, catcalls
singing over me, into the dining room,
as I cock myself upright
and begin the promenade.

SIMMON'S TRUCK STOP

Three and a half hours to home
I stop at the Simmon's 76
where I like to walk past the showers
on the second floor, smell
the wet-tile bodies steaming
through the cracks of swollen doors.

At the cash register, a man
remembering his med-school experience
says a human body can lie
underground eight years
and come up whole, more well-preserved
than the living. He says
it's true--fingernails and hair grow
after the brain has died. I think
of my friend, buried the week before,
his skin blackened. The man
reads my mind, or seems to--
"Carbon monoxide poisoning," he says,
"causes the greatest cosmetic damage."
I know this. The carbon bonds

with the cells, forces oxygen
out of the body, turns the skin coal black.

I turn back to the showers as a cry breaks
from behind the doors. I imagine
the water turned cold, choking off steam,
splattering now against a chilled tile floor.
I picture the men, these truckers,
pressed naked together
against slick walls, afraid
to near the handles, to turn off
the blast. I see them
huddled together, shouting
for someone outside to rescue them
there, naked and cold.

FOR ROBERT PENN WARREN

Your passion roars through me,
makes me pain at my work, unmolded
clay beside yours, yet I hear you always,
pounding out your rhythm, your verse,
like Moses on the mountain.

I throw away my golden idols.
I accept your challenge,
but cannot easily follow you, cannot
witness first-hand the truth
you found burning, and it is
sleazy, this passion, like likker
pounds me warm in the brain.

Oh I love you, love your voice,
those Southern quivers and O's on the ends.
And as I read, I hear you lilt the moment,
timeless. Some nights I cannot hear
myself for you, but revel in crags
of language, in fecundity of humanness,

in each line, each beat
that halts me, presses me on.

I want to walk in your world,
in your time. I want to hear you
tell stories, deep delight, over and over--
your commandments of follies, legends
of mistaken prodigals. And I know
from where you stand, you can see
Arcturus, teaming the Dipper's wain,
blazing the sky in flash-points of light,
reining in nothing, letting it all go wild
and brilliant, showers of stars
flaking down, here, where I stand,
thinking, that nothing
will ever happen again.

LANE ATTENDANT

Through the smoke of her Camel
I ask for change, her inch-long ash
swaying as she pops her fist
sideways into the weathered register,
her horse-flank hip turned to miss
the drawer of narrow cash-slots.
I palm the change and pull back
as her face contorts--
a glob of spit hangs, glistens, then falls
on the heel of my rental bowling shoe.
She swipes it with her sleeve
then prods the shoes towards me.

Two afternoon bowlers sidle up, fat men
slapping each others' backs, priding
each other on great games. They lay down
two pairs of shoes, slinking
wrinkled bills towards the woman,
an esoteric ritual
settled with a wink. I turn
to the hollow echoes of balls
spinning, pins knocking.

The lanes, slim and glistening,
taunt me in. I slick my way
to arrows, release this ball, this black orb,
so carefully chosen
for weight, for size, for power.

I revel in the break, in the violent split
of crashing, falling pins. Behind me
one of the bowlers
snakes closer in congratulation.
"If a woman can bowl, she can fuck"
he whispers, his arm
slipping around me.

Across the smoke-filled, cat-called hall,
I meet the eyes of the lane attendant--
they squint, crinkle in laughter
as her cigarette smoke rises,
a vapor about her.
She nods in my direction and winks
as she pops the drawer for the next bowler.

Turning back to the lane
I cock myself upright, re-line

slick as an arrow, let loose
lane attendant, bowlers, pale afternoon weight
of all that has come and gone--let it all
loose and wild in my own pronouncement
that I, here and dervish, have dared
to mark my own path
through this curled-up, collided, fucked-up
beauty of a world.

SHE VISITS HIS GRAVE ON THURSDAYS

He lies under earth,
skin falling from bone
faster than she
can get on with her life.

In the graveyard, swaying
to unseen muses, she dances
before his tombstone, melts
through red earth, pulls him back,
back to the hardwood floors
where they dance
as they used to dance each morning.

She twirls him now, as he
used to spin her dizzy,
the world blurred in streaks
of color. She tells him to wait
until morning, when everything
will be just fine.
And this time, he listens.
Morning breaks while they turn

together, their bodies infinite
in mirror-lined walls.

But here, in this duned field of green,
in the coolness of dawning autumn,
she slows her sway, red and orange leaves
shifting, settling on him,
shadowed mound beneath her feet,
on this, her final visit.

THE WALL

They search through the books of the dead
to find the number, the column, the row
on the wall. They place flowers, letters,
handkerchiefs embroidered long ago
with lace and satin, a fairy tale of faith.
The wind picks up the letter from Joe
to John--"Fuck it, man, why'd you go
and have to die?"--it floats down
Constitution Avenue and stops
beneath a hot-dog stand.

A boy, dressed in Toughskin jeans
and Reebok tennis shoes, a tiny plastic
flag gripped in his hand, races past
the stand, stamps on the letter
tracking rubber soles across faded white
paper, continues on. His mother
can't keep up, can't sight him
as he turns the corner, daring traffic
to stop for him, there, so small, so
completely dangerous.

THE THINNEST LEDGE

The darkness breathes of city-sweat
and fresh-cut grass. I've climbed to the top
of the Hyatt House parking deck,
a bottle of Cabernet, half-empty, uncorked,
balanced unsteady in my pocket.
I drink from its round mouth,
the bitter tannins tightening my throat
as I straddle the thinnest ledge, unlace
my shoes and hurl them one by one
into darkness. I peel off
my jacket, my shirt,
and stiff-backed, breasts swaying, lean out.

The moon sinks behind a downtown sky-scraper.
Hallowed streetlights cast dull cones
of light, barely ward off
night-shadows. I close my eyes,
clasp my thighs to the raised
concrete grain and hang on
afraid to release, afraid
to hang on.

Below me, the pigeons, breaking wildly, soar,
zig-zagging in foreign patterns
over this empire
of stone-walled, yellow-lined spaces,
concrete spires, shards of amber bottles, and me--
naked to the autumn wind
to the shadowed moon
to the erratic wing-beats of city birds
searing, reckless and luxurious
across the blackened sky.

WAITING FOR INCOMING, SMITH-REYNOLDS AIRPORT

The woman beside me
traces a scar along the right side
of her face. A long, low scar,
deep and raised, it inflames
her delicate skin--the rest of her face
smooth, unblemished, translucent.
I want to touch this scar, feel it
warm my palm as I cup her cheek.
She is beautiful, her eyes wild and black.

A small boy brushes past,
his tight curls slipping in and out
of his collar. The woman
flutters her hand towards the child,
her band of bracelets flashing
gold and silver, splitting in two
the dull airport light.

Outside the window, a small plane
heaves itself to flight
its engines grinding and belching. I curl
my legs beneath my body and under

my swooping green and black sweater,
tuck myself into the cloth covered arms
of the gray waiting chair.

I think of an Aborigine tribe--
the women who squat in the fields,
rocking on their heels
while the men dip hemp threads
into leather pouches filled with urine.
They grind the rope with their teeth
to strengthen it, make it whole.

Soon my friend's plane,
large and solid, will careen in
freely, secure.

The airport windows filter prisms
of split light that break like glass
on the floor, shards of light marking
the children's tennis shoes, the woman's
pumps, the baggage trolleys.

I have had an affair. Am wanting
my friend to absolve me,
to soothe away the pain and joy
of falling into a stranger's arms,
gliding over each other like seals up

from immersion, barking cries
of release, of solitude.

I unfold my thighs
from the sweater, stretch my legs before me,
enjoying the easing tension.
Above the landing strip a Delta
circles warily, curving
as a carrier pigeon circles
three times to sense its direction.

In the field beside the strip,
across the high gates, a man lies
spread-eagle on a patch of brown earth.
He wears a faded blue uniform,
his work boots kicked off beside him,
his face turned slightly to the sun,
like Greta Garbo
in an old movie
waiting, her lips puckered slightly, eyes
closed, lashes long and shielding, as she waits
for the touch of grace, that kiss
of sweet absolution.

Vita

